

# **Cultural Democracy for Whom? A View from the Pacific Islands<sup>1</sup>**

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## **Introduction**

The Pacific islands make up perhaps the most culturally diverse region on earth. Distinct cultures, which have existed for thousands of years, have evolved unique systems of knowledge and understanding, some unknown to western science, such as those related to ocean navigation, vessel construction and traditional medicines.

Most of the indigenous peoples of the twenty-four nations and territories that make up the region known as the Pacific islands want their diverse cultures recognised and perpetuated. This means, in practice, providing for the unique needs of at least a thousand distinct language and/or cultural groups.

For my purposes, I define culture as the way of life of a discrete group which includes a language, a body of accumulated knowledge, skills, beliefs and values. I see culture as central to the understanding of human relationships and acknowledge the fact that members of different cultural groups have unique systems of perceiving and organising the world around them. I also believe that the ways in which we have been socialised largely influence our behaviour and way of thinking as well as our worldview. Language in particular is a major controlling factor which influences the way we perceive and organise the world and the loss or impoverishment of a language can induce often irreversible changes in these processes.

For most of us Pacific Islanders, who still live in the islands where

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indigenous mother tongues are the main modes of communication, culture is something that is lived and continually demonstrated as a matter of behaviour and performance. Our indigenous cultural identities and worldviews of course vary locally as well as regionally. For example, while Polynesians and Melanesians emphasise place and their ties to the land, the latter tend to place more emphasis on performance and other behavioural criteria. Micronesians, on the other hand, emphasise webs of exchange relationships and differentiate themselves using a variety of criteria.

However, two things seem to apply to all Pacific island cultures; first, many Pacific Islanders can and do voluntarily shift their social identities and a person can maintain more than one identity simultaneously. For example, s/he may adopt dual or multiple behavioural attributes, such as residence, language, dress, food, or participation in exchanges. All of these are significant markers and effective determinants of cultural identity. The second and perhaps the most important common aspect of Pacific cultures (in the context of this conference) is their *persistence* despite major political and economic transformations and *in spite* of the imposition of foreign religions, languages and education systems.

### **Cultural democracy - (the conference theme)**

Cultural democracy is a philosophical precept which recognises that the way a person communicates, relates to others, seeks support and recognition from his/her environment (incentive motivation), thinks and learns (cognition) is a product of the *value system* of his/her community. Furthermore, an educational environment or policy that does not recognise the individual's right to remain identified with the *culture* and *language* of his/her group is said to be *culturally undemocratic* (Ramirez and Castaneda, 1974: 23).

Cultural democracy has its roots in an alternative ideology which emerged as a reaction to the Anglo-American conformity view of acculturation in the early part of this century, and was reflected in the writings of people such as Kallen (1924). It later became identified with cultural pluralism and multiculturalism. However, the right of the individual to choose his/her

cultural affiliation (a typically western liberal emphasis) is reflected in this warning by Gordon (1964: 262-263):

The system of cultural pluralism ... has frequently been described as cultural democracy since it posits the right of ethnic groups in a democratic society to maintain their communal identities and their own sub-cultural values.... however, we must also point out that democratic values prescribe free choice not only for groups but also for individuals. That is, the individual as he (sic) matures and reaches the age where rational decision is feasible, should be allowed to choose freely whether to remain within the group, to branch out into multiple inter-ethnic contacts or even to change affiliation to that of another ethnic group, should he wish to do so.

Gordon was referring to the USA and similar nation states such as Australia and New Zealand, whose majority populations consist of people with relatively recent cultural histories in terms of their relationship to the 'place' in which they are living - about two hundred years or so - and whose cultural origins go back in time to genealogical trees rooted in another place and another time. For Pacific island societies and the minority indigenous cultures of western industrialised nations, cultural democracy needs to be viewed in the context of their own cultural histories. As such, my perspective of cultural democracy may be a little different from most.

We know that the history of formal education in the Pacific islands is a history of the introduction, through the manifest as well as the hidden curriculum, of the dominant ideologies and cultures of Europe (England and France in particular, and more recently, Australia, New Zealand and the USA). This has had a profound and lasting impact upon our region's indigenous peoples and their cultures, many of which have existed for millennia.

In my view, cultural democracy, for most Pacific island societies, has to do with the right and the opportunity to study and learn important elements of

their own cultures in schools and universities, an opportunity denied them since schools first began in the early part of last century, because most schools were set up to transmit a foreign culture in a foreign language.

I therefore wish to make a case not only for understanding Pacific cultures, but also for including important aspects of them in the curriculum of formal education, including university, as a first step towards intercultural education and a true cultural democracy for all. In this regard, I would agree with Walsh's assertion that:

each person is born into a particular cultural heritage and historical tradition, and that each person should know fully the principles on which his (sic) particular culture rests. Only then will he (sic) know how to evaluate it and how to improve it; what judgements to make relative to other cultures and whether to stay within it or move apart from it (Walsh, 1973: 6).

### **Education in traditional societies**

Before European contact, education in most Pacific island societies was synonymous with the western concept of socialisation, a cultural process whereby a child learns to be a member of a specific human society, sharing with other members a specific culture. But the introduction of western schooling (and I stress schooling) disrupted the process of education in most Pacific island societies. Furthermore, the fact that teaching and learning had to be undertaken in a language foreign not only to students but often to teachers as well, meant that many were left out or at best learned imperfectly. We now know from school achievement literature how important family background and language proficiency are for success in school compared to the types of school attended (see for example, Coleman, 1968).

The structures and processes of colonialism together transformed very important aspects of Pacific cultures, including the very values which underpinned important socialisation practices. Goldsmith's conclusions in

*The Way: an Ecological worldview*, (1993: 285) about the fate of traditional systems may sound unpalatable to some, but it's true as far as most of our indigenous cultures are concerned. He said:

The colonial powers sought to destroy the cultural patterns of traditional societies largely because many of their essential features prevented traditional people from subordinating social, ecological and spiritual imperatives to the short-term economic ends served by participation in the colonial economy. There is no better way of destroying a society than by undermining its educational system.

Schooling for Pacific islanders was, and still is, aimed not, as Lawton (1975: 9) suggests, at the transmission of important elements of their cultures, but at cultural transformation of most of the young and, in some cases, alienating them from the (traditional) cultures of their parents and grandparents. Modern education requires that children be socialised in institutions and not in their families and communities. This means, for thousands of Pacific island students, isolation from their communities during a great part of their formative years.

Furthermore, modern education was and still is concerned with training people for a career in the urban industrial sector or the cash economy. In many Pacific island countries, it is probably true to say that when a person completes primary school s/he leaves the village for the nearest town; when s/he finishes high school s/he leaves the island for the capital city; and when s/he obtains a degree s/he leaves for Australia, New Zealand or the USA. Instead of providing Pacific island societies with a means of renewing themselves, formal education has by and large provided instead a means of ensuring their inevitable demise.

So far the push for modern education in many PICs has been seen as providing a basis for modern economic development - the introduction to and/or success in the global cash economy. Teaching and learning about Pacific cultures was seen as having had little contribution to make towards the achievement of overriding economic goals of firstly the colonial powers

and later national/government development plans.

Today, it is only those elements of culture that are seen as important for economic development such as tourism, that seem to be valued: elements such as some traditional rituals and ceremonies, as well as certain types of craftwork and performing arts. This means that many of our young people were and are being deprived of that traditional knowledge and understanding which could make them more effective members of their societies. The worst consequence of this neglect is that some cultures are unable to renew themselves, and many Pacific Islanders, particularly young people, may be doomed to becoming isolated in an anonymous mass society (either in Pacific towns or foreign cities) in which they fulfil menial functions or no function at all.

### **School and cultural transmission**

Lawton (1975: 9) defined curriculum as a selection from the culture of a society of aspects which are regarded as so valuable that their survival is not left to chance, but is entrusted to teachers for expert transmission to the young. If we accept such a definition, then it follows that the curriculum in Pacific island schools ought to reflect the best of Pacific island cultures in terms of shared language, knowledge, skills, beliefs and values. This is important because a curriculum - any curriculum - makes certain assumptions not only about teachers and pupils, but also about knowledge, the nature of learning, and the way people behave.

Many educators would not disagree with the assumption that the socio-cultural system of a student's home and community is influential in producing culturally unique and preferred modes of relating to others, (especially teachers and authority figures), thinking, learning, remembering and problem solving. The concept of cultural democracy requires that all of these be incorporated as the principle bases upon which all educational programmes (aimed at bringing about changes in our schools) need to be based.

However, the curriculum, because it is a "selection", is of course influenced

to a great degree by the experiences and ideologies of those involved in the selection process and the dominant world view/ideology of a particular time and place. Pacific island school curricula were and continue to be heavily influenced by foreigners - beginning last century, with a variety of Christian missionaries and colonial administrators, and continuing today with foreign aid consultants and advisers, many of whom have very little understanding of the cultural contexts in which school curricula are developed and implemented.

### **Cultural democracy for Pacific island countries (PICs)**

At a more general level then, Cultural Democracy for PICs, in my view, also means placing greater emphasis on indigenous Pacific cultures in educational and other forms of planning and development. At the institutional level, it would mean a culturally democratic learning environment, from preschool to university, taking into consideration the cultures of pupils and students, especially the three critical components of Language, Values, and Teaching/Learning styles. In each of these components, many Pacific Islanders, are bound to find differences between what they learned formally in schools and universities and what they learned and/or were taught in their various communities mainly as a consequence of informal learning and socialisation into particular cultures.

Allow me to illustrate by reference to my own culture, Tongan. Tonga is the only Pacific island country which was not formally colonised by a foreign power. Consequently, Tongan educational development has been largely the result of decisions made by Tongans themselves (with a little help from invited foreign advisers). When secondary education was introduced in the mid-nineteenth century, students studied Tongan language and culture as well as other school subjects, in their own language, Tongan. The school curriculum, although based largely on the English public school model, was implemented in the Tongan language and school textbooks were translated into Tongan. Many people in Tonga today still speak with fondness and nostalgia about what has come to be popularly known as the Moulton era of formal education, which lasted from 1866 to 1905, after the Wesleyan educator, Dr E. Moulton.

However, after Moulton, and particularly after the Second World War, and in keeping with the country's modernisation goals, many educational changes were instituted including changes to the Tongan alphabet as well as a new emphasis on the teaching and learning of English. These changes have had serious implications for Tongan culture as it is difficult to fully understand important aspects of it without an adequate knowledge and understanding of the Tongan language. Tongan vocabulary, for example, reflects cultural etiquette in the context of a hierarchical social structure with words graded to reflect the social rank of the persons being addressed as well as the speaker.

Unlike the western, scientific tradition of inquiry, the Tongan tradition of inquiry is less abstract and analytical and more practical and substantive. It does not place great emphasis on logical thinking as described by western philosophers. Instead, ideas are expressed through people's cultural experiences over time. Learning and knowledge are not divorced from the realities of everyday life and experiences and tend to have very strong utilitarian emphases. Although Tonga's only private educational institution ('Atenisi) was founded on the philosophy of education for its own sake, many Tongan (university) graduates still believed that the purpose of education (*ako*) was to gain '*ilo* (knowledge) and become *poto* (educated) in order to be able to meet their obligations to their extended family, community and country - a concept known as *faifatongia*. Such useful/beneficial application of '*ilo* (knowledge) is the mark of a *tangata potu* ("educated person") in the context of Tongan culture (for a more detailed discussion of the concepts of *ako*, '*ilo* and *poto*, see Thaman, 1988).

Years of formal education, especially in post-secondary institutions outside of my own culture, taught me that mainstream western academic traditions are preoccupied with clarity and precision of expression of thought. The message that I received from taking numerous courses in the sciences and social sciences at university and teachers' college was that subjective, emotion-filled expressions of language were to be avoided at all times. Yet these are the very things that characterise my own cultural expressions and language.



The language of Tongan indigenous education is highly culturally determined and value-laden, and is not conducive to objective, impersonal expressions. It does not, for example, distinguish between objective and subjective statements and has no equivalent structures to describe these. However, Tongan concepts are ideal for communicating beliefs, sentiments and attitudes and in the context of Tongan society and culture, they are highly functional and practical. Thinking and learning are thus integrated into a cultural system where human activities and interpersonal relationships are extremely important (Thaman, 1988: 89-125).

As for values, their nature, form and expression would also present some difficulties for Pacific teachers and schools. This is partly because of the dismal failure of teacher training to deal with the sociological, psychological and anthropological characteristics of different ethnic groups which constitute Pacific island populations. Part of this failure may be due to the lack of such information but it is also partly because of the Eurocentric perspective of most teacher education institutions as well as teacher educators. Furthermore, the information that exists about Pacific island societies is largely monocultural and/or Anglo-American in orientation. There is an urgent need therefore, for different, especially indigenous perspectives. Our university, through its Institutes (particularly Pacific Studies (IPS) and Education (IOE), has contributed in some way to the publication and dissemination of works by Pacific Islanders, in the hope that indigenous views are heard.

In terms of teaching styles, the work of people such as Bernstein (1961), Hess and Shipman (1965) and more recently, Harris (1992), are important in that they inform us that ethnicity or differences in cultural values are as important as socioeconomic class - if not more so - in determining characteristics of the child's learning style. And since the learning style is mainly the result of a unique, culturally determined teaching style, we need to look at teaching styles which are characteristic of different cultural groups, including our own. It is my view that implementing these three elements (Language, Values and Teaching/ Learning Styles) in planning teacher education would go a long way towards providing culturally democratic learning environments in our schools and universities.

The balance of this article is a consideration of recent attempts in the region to address the issue of education and culture and the difficulties faced by some of those who are trying to provide education that is culturally sensitive to Pacific island students.

### **Search for curriculum relevance**

During the 1970s and 1980s, when many Pacific island nations became politically independent, there was a major push towards making school curricula more "relevant". Unfortunately there were varying definitions of relevance: some saw it as relevant to the needs of the job market; others to the next stage of formal education, such as university studies. However, a more recent and noticeable drive has been to make school curricula more responsive to local cultures and values.

In 1991, as part of initiatives under the United Nations Decade For Culture (1988-97) a regional UNESCO-sponsored seminar on the theme "Education and Cultural Development" held in Rarotonga, Cook Islands, addressed the need for PICs to incorporate elements of their traditional cultures into the school curriculum. Seminar proceedings, together with recommendations for UNESCO as well as Pacific island governments, are contained in a book *Voices in a Seashell* (Teasdale and Teasdale, 1992). Pacific island nations represented at the seminar, including those from Aotearoa and some Australian aboriginal nations, reaffirmed not only their desire for cultural development through education but also the need for indigenous peoples to have control over decisions relating to it.

In May, 1994, I attended a conference in Honolulu on the question of 'Whose Culture and Language in the Curriculum?'. The meeting was organised by the National Association for Asian and Pacific American Education (NAAPE). Keynote speakers included Professors Lily Wong Fillmore and Ronald Takaki, both from the University of California at Berkeley, and strong advocates of bilingualism and multicultural education. It was refreshing to hear educators speak about the challenges of cultural diversity.

Other keynote speakers at the NAAPE, all Americans, lamented the loss of and continuing de-emphasis on Asian and Pacific ancestral languages and cultures both in mainland U.S.A. and Pacific American schools and universities. While it was not difficult for me to understand why minority languages and cultures have to struggle against mainstream languages and cultures in countries like the USA, Australia and perhaps even New Zealand, it was difficult to understand why many Pacific Islanders would consciously and unashamedly participate in the continuing de-emphasis on and even downgrading of their native languages and cultures in their own countries.

The concern about the quality of teaching and learning in Pacific schools and universities occasionally comes to the fore particularly during political election times. Although few real attempts have been made to pinpoint the possible causes of worsening examination pass rates, falling literacy rates, increasing school drop out rates and the like, there is no shortage of assumptions made about the possible causes of these problems. Parents often blame teachers; teachers blame 'the Ministry', under-prepared students, or disinterested parents; educationists blame an examination-oriented school curriculum; education officials blame teacher educators, and students simply say that school is boring!

A solution which became widely accepted by many PICs has been the establishment of preschool/early childhood education centres. The movement gained popularity in many PICs during the 1970s as part of the popularisation of the notion of compensatory education. Based largely on the theory of cultural deprivation, the concept implies that certain (nurturing) cultures do not provide the necessary influences to make children successful in school or acceptable in mainstream society. It also implies that the principle role of the school is to act as the first of a chain of influences that will cause "disadvantaged" children to accept mainly white, middle-class culture and values, the ones upon which the school is based. The school is therefore seen not only to educate but also to re-educate students. *It seems as if the theories underlying compensatory education clearly reinforce the conception that the child/student's culture is wrong and that the school represents the cultural standards to which all must conform.*

The push for compensatory education, of course, has been further strengthened by PIC's drive towards modernisation and the development of a cash economy, where formal education is seen as the instrument of modern development, and should be aimed at producing trained manpower and a modern citizenry. But the problem with modernism is its emphasis on universalism, with its commitment to nationalising, standardising and homogenising of ethnic and cultural diversity. Some of course see the demise of cultural diversity not only as desirable but necessary, as the following extract from Shibutani and Kwan (1965: 589) illustrates:

The basic differences between ethnic groups are cultural, and conventional norms serve as masks to cover the similarities. Whenever men (sic) interact informally the common human culture comes through. It would appear then that it is only a matter of time before a more enlightened citizenry will realise this... and ethnic identity will become a thing of the past.

In many PICs the ideology of universalism seems to be pervasive and is reflected in many development projects (including educational ones) where economic and political considerations tend to dominate. Consequently, Culture (with a capital C) is often seen as preventing the achievement of many people in modern society and traditions as hampering (social) mobility and academic success. Instead of adjusting development models to suit the cultures of those who are being 'developed', people (including pupils and teachers) are expected to adjust to predetermined, often imported models and policies, and are often blamed for their subsequent failures.

In my view, one of the major difficulties which will prevent educators from formulating a coherent educational policy and realising the goals of cultural democracy is the persistent notion that school children (and university students for that matter) constitute a homogeneous group. Many educators, myself included, have long been suffering from cultural blindness and have often failed to recognise the diversity of socialisation practices among our students and colleagues, including those with whom we come into daily contact.

It is also unfortunate that Culture has been cited by many people both within the education system as well as the general public, as a problem and often an excuse for students' failure, rather than a challenge for educators. Too many of us believe that what is wrong with many of our students is that they are dominated by cultures that make it difficult for them to learn in our schools and universities. At the university where I work, it is not uncommon to hear colleagues complain about students, suggesting that they should never have been admitted to university in the first place, because of their language problems; that they seldom show initiative, cannot freely express themselves and are not independent learners. Little has been said about the fact that many of our students are effectively semi-literate in both their mother tongues and English (or French) thus suggesting that neither the school nor their culture is at fault. Perhaps too few teachers realise that their students' language ability, the basis for both cultural transmission and learning, has been compromised in the process of their various societies' modern development.

### **Cultural democracy - a possible solution**

In my view, there is an urgent need to incorporate, in school and university curricula, elements from the socio-cultural systems of the students themselves. This is important for several reasons. Firstly, because the study of Pacific island cultures and languages is important for their continued development (cultural development); secondly, it is important for pedagogic purposes; and finally it is important for its own sake.

To realise the above goal will not be easy. First, we must identify aspects of culture and language to include in the curriculum. The selection should be made by Pacific peoples themselves. The Tongan Studies curriculum is an example of an attempt to include in the manifest curriculum of secondary schools, the culture and language of students. It is also an example of what Hirsch (1987) refers to as an intensive (cultural literacy) curriculum. An extensive curriculum along the lines suggested by Hirsch (without his Eurocentrism) may be possible for more culturally heterogeneous societies, such as those of Fiji and many Melanesian countries.

Another difficulty in realising the goals of cultural democracy in our schools has to do with the fact that many Pacific Islanders themselves are apathetic towards the formal teaching and learning of indigenous cultures and languages. Many of those who have shown interest in the study and development of indigenous cultures and languages have often been people who have experienced direct suppression of their languages and cultures as a result of colonisation and subsequent domination by more numerous and powerful groups; for example, the Maori of New Zealand and native Hawaiians of the U.S.A.

Few genuine attempts have been made to prepare future island leaders for the much-needed process of cultural renewal. Not many governments offer tertiary scholarships in areas such as the expressive arts, linguistics, literature, history, anthropology, botany or zoology - subjects that are central to understanding Pacific island cultures and societies. The over-subscription of university courses in management, economics, business administration, accounting, and computer studies, is very much in line with people's quest for modernity and life styles which have become associated with what Rifkin calls the culture of privacy, characterised by such things as mirrors, lawns, store-bought and machine-made goods, television and wheels (Rifkin, 1992: 153-177).

## **Conclusion**

Pacific island nations are at a crossroads in their educational development and it is perhaps timely for planners and educators to reflect critically on what schools have been teaching the young and how they are doing it. Economic goals seem to have dominated much of educational development in PICs during the past three decades. Perhaps it is time for cultural development to take a front seat. The concept of cultural democracy is a useful one because it implies that before we begin to understand others we need to first understand ourselves. It would also mean that in PICs there is a need for more serious consideration of learners' cultures in educational planning, particularly in the areas of curriculum development and teacher education.

Finally, the current concern for sustainable development and environmental conservation in most PICs must include a consideration of a people's culture - their knowledge, skills, values and beliefs - because development that ignores these realities is bound to fail. Furthermore, the modern (western) view of the world based on individualism and privacy, and legitimised through an education (and political) system based on confrontation, competition and elitism, is unsustainable and ecologically destructive, and may lead us to a cultural and developmental cul de sac.

Students need to learn from their traditional cultural heritages, values and concepts that will help them find ways of coping with the kinds of changes that have been flung upon them because of forces beyond their control. But in order to do so, students must first learn to speak their languages and probe their mysteries through careful and systematic study. This is where analysis and critical thinking and the continuing and sustained search for fresh ideas not yet formulated and shaped, characteristic of our western educational heritage, will play a vital role. If cultural democracy becomes an educational goal in PICs, future generations of Pacific Islanders would be in a better position to create a culture out of the best of many cultures, and thus realise their common humanity.

My own belief in the importance of designing an education programme which allows Pacific island students to learn and understand their own cultures together with those of others through a consideration of the basic principles of language, cultural values and learning/teaching styles, is perhaps better conveyed in the following lines from *Brains and Paddle* (Thaman, 1993: 35).

thinking is tiring  
like paddling against the waves  
until feeling comes lightly  
late into the pacific night  
when these islands calm me  
stroking my sorrows  
i ask for silence  
and they give it

i ask for forgiveness  
and they raise my face

i carried with me scars  
from loving and knowing  
many planets  
yet when i fell asleep  
the ocean sounds gathered  
my dreams into its depths  
and then for the first time  
i did not feel responsible  
for the pain of the earth  
or the darkness of night

today i wonder  
what the difference is  
between one sea and another  
or how to recover morning  
and conquer doubt  
the pulse of our separate  
brains has the answer  
it is in our becoming  
that we are one

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